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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the importance of stylistic variety to the writing of beautiful language, even as that writing is used as a tool of critical consciousness. It begins by discussing the application of style for socially responsible rhetorical communication, through revealing to students that language used in multiple rhetorical situations both reflects and creates their multiple social identities. It then argues that the lack of teaching of style is due to the shift from process writing to socially created knowledge, explaining that many instructors assume style means teaching a narrow view rather than critical literacy. It concludes that style can find a place within critical pedagogy. (EF)

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by Tom Pace

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Composing and Community: The Teaching of Style as a Tool of Critical Pedagogy

I wish to start this talk by quoting one of education's major advocates of critical pedagogy on the importance of teaching students to be aware of beautiful language.

> It is the duty of those who write to write beautifully. It does not matter what one writes or writes about. It is for this reason that I always recommend that my master and doctoral students, when they are about to write their thesis, should vigorously read authors who write well and beautifully, even if the authors are not in their area of concentration (80).

This quote comes from Paulo Freire in one of his last books, *Letters to Christina*. I begin with this quote because it reminds all of us whose business it is to teach our students that writing is a tool of critical consciousness not to dismiss the importance of stylistic variety, the importance of paying close attention to word choice, to sentence structure, to paragraph arrangement and, yes, even to the possibility that we and our students can – and perhaps should as Freire insists – write beautiful language.

It is with this call in mind that I wish to argue that composition teachers and scholars can re-imagine and re-claim the canon of style as an effective tool for achieving socially responsible rhetorical communication. Now, I regard effective writing instruction as the type of instruction that can achieve the goals of teaching students critical consciousness as well as discourse that succeeds in a variety of academic and professional settings. Style can play a key role in achieving these goals. My working definition of style is that it is a viable element of writing instruction that encourages students to understand the decisions they make when using language

directly affects the meaning students try to convey in their work. By focusing on style, writing teachers are not participating in a meaningless classroom activity that is separate from the real world of students' lives, but rather they are revealing to students that the language they use in multiple rhetorical situations both reflect and create their multiple social identities, while, at the same time, this focus on stylistic variance teaches students multiple writing strategies to use.

But style, one of the five canons of classical rhetoric, has all but disappeared from the composition landscape. Research in ERIC and other teaching databases reveals very little scholarship being performed on the term "style" at the collegiate level. Most searches for "style" bring up "styles of teaching," and usually then at the primary and secondary levels. Preliminary searches in the Dissertation Abstracts database, a useful harbinger of current research, reveals only one dissertation on the teaching of style in the last ten years. To say the least, the teaching of style is no longer in style.

Much of this dismissal of style as a viable element of composition instruction has occurred during the last twenty years, with the advent of many post-process theories of writing instruction. Beginning in the early 1980s, composition studies took what John Trimbur called in 1994 "the social turn." Writing teachers and scholars began to look at writing less as an individual process and more as a social phenomenon. Andrea Lunsford points out that since the 1980s and 1990s "composition studies view composing not as a series of discrete skills or a package of processes to be practiced but as the very way we constitute and know our worlds" (9). Susan Jarratt, in her essay "Feminism and Composition: The Case for Conflict," examines the implications of writing theorists who focus on writing as the product of autonomous individuals, noting that these theorists tend to ignore "the uneven power relations resulting from [social] differences" (113). Using a theory based on the pre-Socratic Sophists of ancient Greece, Jarratt

argues that knowledge is always constructed socially and that "public action is guided by informed debate among members of a democratic community" (114). Many writing teachers during the last decade of the twentieth century have used the composition classroom as a site for the exploration of how writing and language construct ideas of race, class, and gender, in part to invite students to see language as a creator of multiple identities, and to use this understanding actively as informed citizens in a democracy.

On the one hand, I agree with much of what these scholars argue. On the other hand, I worry that the study of style has suffered because of many of these theories. In other words, if scholars such as Trimbur, Jarratt and others argue – correctly I might add – that learning to write *is* a social process and that language constructs ideas as well as social categories, then why is the study and the teaching of style often ignored? If we are going to invite students to see their world as constructed by language, then the study of style should be a necessary component, not something that is counter to a pedagogy that urges students to become reflective users of language.

It seems that many of us work under assumptions that the study of style automatically means the study of a reductive, narrow, colonizing method of teaching writing and tend to dismiss the study of style altogether. I use the words "narrow" and "colonizing" to refer to the belief, possessed by many writing teachers who I know, that teaching style forces students into a way of writing and thinking that corresponds to dominant capitalist ideology that leaves little or no room for resistance or dissention on the students' part. In "The Subject in Discourse," John Clifford argues that institutional education, including writing classrooms, are subservient to dominant ideologies. In doing so, he criticizes such composition textbooks as *St. Martin's*

Handbook because it makes assumptions about apolitical subjectivity based on "romantic" notions of the individual writer. Clifford concludes by arguing:

> We should do the intellectual work we know best: helping students to read and write and think in ways that both resist domination and exploitation and encourage self consciousness about who they are and can be in the social world (51).

What strikes me about Clifford's argument, and about the passage above, is the dichotomy he establishes between teaching writing as a service and teaching writing as critical literacy. In other words, Clifford appears to suggest that teaching such skills as diction, sentence structure, and paragraph organization are counter productive to teaching students places "where hegemony and democracy are contested, where subject positions are constructed, where power and resistance are enacted, where hope for a just society depends on our committed intervention" (Clifford 51). If we see style merely as a prescriptive set of colonizing rules – as Clifford suggests such books as *St. Martin's Handbook* do – then, yes, it can be very destructive. But the teaching of style can be more than just a set of prescriptive rules. Style can find a pedagogical space within critical pedagogy. I wish to reclaim style as a canon of rhetoric that asks students to realize the choices they make about the words they use, the sentences they construct, and the paragraphs they arrange have consequences for their audiences and for themselves. In other words, the study of style does not contradict the teaching goals set up by scholars like Clifford, but rather style can find a space in a classroom that promotes critical awareness, as well as discourse that works in both academic and professional contexts.

In spite of the dominant narrative over the past twenty years that often dismisses early work in the field, a heroic tale that features ever more complex theories superseding one another, some scholars have argued that the teaching of style can be conducive to critical pedagogy. The

recent work of Donald Rubin, for instance, and the whole body of work by Ann Berthoff, one of the founding mothers of composition studies, both point to a theory and practice of composition instruction that allows the teaching of language use to achieve both the goals of critical awareness and successful cross-disciplinary communication.

Rubin, in his introduction to *Composing Social Identity in Written Language* introduces his concept of socio-stylistics of writing, in which he argues that "style is at once a function of the writer's idiosyncratic identity, and at the same time a function of the social matrix in which the writing and the writer are embedded" (3). Rubin's insistence on style as a social marker that "reflects the writer's identity, and at the same time creates that identity" provides writing instructors with a theory for thinking about style not as a reductive, mechanistic tool but rather as a significant component of critical pedagogy, one that invites students to see their individual writing as part of a larger, social community.

This idea of the socio-stylistics of composing also connects to the work of Ann Berthoff. In *The Making of Meaning*, Berthoff argues that to study composing is to study how we use language to interpret and to know the world. She suggests that writing teachers see composing as the active formation of understanding by the imagination. We form texts, then, by selecting according to our needs and purposes. This idea of using language to know the world allows a place for style in composition pedagogy, it seems to me, because it places decisions students make about their writing at the level of the language use – diction, sentences, paragraphs. It also connects to Rubin's call for a socio-stylistics of writing instruction by inviting students to look at the intersection between individual decisions about writing style and the larger rhetorical implications in using various styles.

In her textbook *Forming, Thinking, Writing* Berthoff puts these ideas to practice. These writing strategies provide compositionists with ways to reconceive style as a salient part of writing pedagogy that develops students' critical thinking skills, while also offering various strategies for writing successful academic and non-academic discourse. Berthoff stresses that

> rhetoric is concerned fundamentally and continually with the relationship of language and thought: How does this way of putting it differ from that way? How does it change what is said? What changes in language affect my intention? (*Forming* 216).

Berthoff's characterization of rhetoric as an interrelationship between form and content not only breaks down that dichotomy, but it provides a space for stylistic pedagogy in the writing classroom. Many of the classroom practices she outlines in *Forming, Thinking, Writing* ask student writers to study, analyze, and construct multiple variations of sentences and paragraphs in order to recognize a good voice for prose, as well as be able to develop different voices on their own. For example, she might ask students to scrutinize sentences by, say, Rachel Carson, identify the parts of speech, and write an interpretive paraphrase of the various sentences. Another exercise might ask students to compare paragraphs written by different professional writers, or take a jumbled collection of sentences from a paragraph and rearrange them into what the student would think the original paragraph looked like. The purpose of these exercises is to get students to see the concrete relationship between *what* they write and *how* they write it, as well as how decisions about language use reflect and create identities within discourse communities.

I have used Rubin and Berthoff's ideas as the foundation to many of the first-year composition classes I teach. When I started teaching at Miami University three and half years ago as a graduate teaching associate, I was required to take a "Teaching College Writing"

seminar. In that seminar, we were introduced to the theories and practices of teaching writing at Miami, using a standard syllabus heavily influenced by social construction theories of composition. During the graduate seminar, we were told by our instructor that we were not to teach style. According to the instructor, the teaching of style ran counter to the goals of first-year composition at Miami. We were told that style was more product-oriented, an individual-based pedagogy that was not compatible with the social-based critical pedagogy the seminar advocated. But I'm stubborn and didn't listen. I still wanted to teach style and suspected at the time that it *could* be a tool of critical pedagogy. The work of Rubin and Berthoff provided me with a theory and practice to do it.

During my second year in the doctoral program, I put some of these theories to practice. The first-year composition course I taught asked students to analyze cultural texts, critique institutional discourse, analyze arguments, and other goals often associated with critical pedagogy at Miami. On the advice of a colleague from a different institution, I also asked my students to buy Joseph Williams' little book *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. In his book, Williams defines style as "how we choose to arrange our words to the best effect" (4). Williams also suggests that style bridges the gap between the individual and the social in two very distinct senses: one, getting students to write more 'clearly' will make them more effective communicators and thus their inner lives will be less alienated from the public arena; two, playing with the different possibilities of language opens up students to various ways they interact with the public, as well as professional work settings. I found Williams' definitions of style compatible with Rubin and Berthoff's theories of composition, as well as easier for first-year students to understand. Rubin and Berthoff's theories of composing and Williams' definitions became more relevant later that semester as Miami was shaken by campus protest.

That October, the Center for Black Culture and Learning on campus was broken into and papered with racist and homophobic flyers and pamphlets. For two days, both black and white students protested the university's perceived failure to react quickly enough in a way that addressed the fears that many minorities at Miami face. In our composition classroom, conversation revolved around the event, the editorials and articles in the campus paper, and the statements made by Miami University's president. As my class and I discussed and wrote about these events, we found ourselves analyzing the word choice, the sentence structure, and style of these texts. Here, Williams' ideas about style and effective communication became more clear to my students. He argues that many writers often hide their intentions behind language:

> Some writers use complicated language not only to dress up their thinking, but to mask its absence, hoping that opacity will impress those who confuse difficulty with substance. Others use intimidating language to protect what they have from those who want a piece of it – the power and privilege that go with the ruling class. We conceal ideas by locking them up, but we can also hide them behind a style so impenetrable that only those trained to read and endure it can find them (7-8).

A number of my students used Williams' idea about language and thinking as a method for critically reading the style of one of President Garland's letters to the Miami community following the protests. Garland's letter attempted to assuage student and faculty concerns over the break-in by explaining his and Miami's support of multiculturalism in higher education, while at the same time it dismissed the efforts of many of the campus protestors as being too reactionary. My students examined the types of words Garland used, copied them down, imitated his sentence structure, translated his words into their own vernacular, and unpacked a language that revealed more clearly his attempt to smooth over the situation with as little conflict

as possible. Some of these students wrote papers that analyzed the president's rhetorical position as one that attempted to redirect the audience's focus from blaming the administration to blaming the protestors themselves for stirring up trouble. By focusing on Garland's "style," my students and I began to regard the teaching of style as complimentary to the goals of critical pedagogy, something for writers to use as a tool to investigate critically their own writing practices and the practices of others.

Although it would be impossible to draw general conclusions from one class, what I describe here is just one experience, not necessarily a pattern. But, this one experience does suggest possibilities for the re-imagining of style as an effective part of critical pedagogy.

To conclude, I want to leave you with a quote from another prominent advocate of critical pedagogy – bell hooks. In her book *Teaching to Transgress* hooks, like Freire before her, also recognizes the importance of beautiful writing and the importance for students to recognize stylistic variety as a means of achieving critical consciousness. She writes:

> Using the vernacular means that translation into standard English may be needed if one wishes to reach a more inclusive audience. In the classroom setting, I encourage students to use their first language and translate it so they do not feel that seeking higher education will necessarily estrange them from that language and culture they know most intimately. . . . This call for the acknowledgment and celebration of diverse voices, and consequently of diverse language and speech, necessarily disrupts the primacy of standard English (172-173).

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